



John Slater

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Interviewer: Chad Comello

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Transcriber: Elizabeth Ceisel

INTRODUCTION

John Slater has lived in Morton Grove since 1960. He grew up in Chicago and was in college for engineering in 1941 when Pearl Harbor was attacked. As an engineering officer in a combat battalion, John coordinated beach landings in the Pacific, and narrowly missed being killed by a kamikaze attack. After the war he and Mary Helen, his wife of 60 years, opened a machine shop in Chicago, which he ran for 49 years. Over the years John has remained involved in the Boy Scouts, the American Legion, Friends of the Morton Grove Forest Preserves, and various other civic projects. Together with Mary Helen, John was instrumental in establishing Morton Grove's Veterans Memorial and the museum's Education Center, and through his philanthropy dedicated the Quiet Reading Room at the public library to his late wife's memory.

JS: John Slater

Q: Question asked by interviewer, Chad Comello

JS: Mary Helen, my wife, died in July of '14, not so long ago. We were married for 60 years, 54 of them in Morton Grove. And I'm still living in Morton Grove alone, the same house, adjacent to the forest preserve, which gives me a chance to see creatures of the wild. It's been suggested I should move into some facility that provides necessities of life for me and cares for me and somebody is there for me if I need it. However, I prefer where I am now at least at this point, even though I am limping. My activities in the village have very often been centered around the American Legion and I'm still a member, still active. And I'm also a member of the VFW in Skokie, and I'm a member of the Morton Grove Historical Society, and active with the Boy Scouts—not physically active anymore, but philanthropically involved.

I have enjoyed living in Morton Grove, never thought about moving elsewhere. I commuted quite a ways, 18th street and Damen, where I had a shop for 49 years. Jobbing machine shop, job shop, perhaps you know what it means by a job shop. No specific product, but what jobs we get from the customers' needs. Provide what he needed rather than what we had. Most businesses sell what they have, but we would provide what you need. My biggest customers were Electro-Motive Division, which makes the diesel electric locomotives, and the printing industry, the newspaper printing industry, like the *Chicago Tribune*. There's more to a newspaper than the copy, the editorial copy. It's a mechanical

operation, necessary to get the paper out every day. Lot of machinery involved, lot of newsprint to handle, lot of newspaper to handle coming out of the press. And the machinery was not foolproof and didn't last forever. I was always available to help them keep the newspaper coming out every day.

Q: Let's jump back. Where were you born?

JS: I was born in Chicago, 1921. Lived in Chicago in a couple of different places 'til I moved here. Mary Helen and I lived in one apartment for six years in Chicago. And then moved here in '60. She was beset by many problems physically and in the end suffered from Alzheimer's for a period of time. Which is a terrible type of disease. I courted her, I met her... if we're gonna go into me, I met her ice skating and I courted her ice skating and skiing. And we skied up until, well, how old was I in '98? Yeah, about '98, our last ski trip. Our son is now an avid snowboarder. We enjoyed skiing and traveling that went with it.

Q: What was your first impression of her when you saw her ice-skating?

JS: Well now, I might as well tell you. I met her at a cocktail lounge, sitting smoking a cigarette. It didn't take her long to quit smoking after we got acquainted. She found out I was a non-smoker, from day one forever there after. And she quit cold turkey and never smoked again. She was very beautiful.

Q: Was this in downtown Chicago where you met?

JS: No, this was at the arena, which doesn't exist anymore. It was an ice skating facility east of the loop, the scene of the Ice Capades and events like that. It was also a public skating facility with a cocktail lounge. She was a teacher there, ice-skating teaching. She taught me some too, because I was just a run of the mill skater. You'll have to ask me another question to get me going again.

Q: Tell me about some early memories of Chicago that you have as a kid.

JS: Well, I went to public elementary school and I went to Lane Tech High School, which is renowned. It is now a co-ed; at that time it was not. It was a technical high school—shop courses, welding, usual wood shop, of course, but also machine shop, foundry, forging. I took air conditioning, which was another shop available, but I never went into air conditioning as a profession. I went to Iowa State College, now Iowa State University. It was a land grant college with an ROTC unit, which all male students had to join. And in '41 when you-know-what happened, I went to accelerated course, stayed in school 'cause it was an engineering course and there was a need for engineering skills, officers.

I went from graduation ahead of time to Officer Candidate School, which was a six-week crash course to make you become a "90-day wonder." My first

assignment was with an engineer combat battalion, which was mostly in the amphibious business, operating beaches. We were attached to the 77th infantry division, went to Hawaii and our first hot landing was in Guam and then we had two in the Philippines, Tacloban and Ipil. And then we had one on Ie Shima, a little island off of Okinawa.

After that the bomb was dropped, which was great for the Japanese and us, and I can go into that in detail if anybody would like to hear me say well of dropping the bomb. Because I saw what the alternative would have been and the battle we would have had to land on Japan and defeat every man woman and child, which was enlisted by the Japanese military. They were still making rifles—their factory did not stop when it was all over; they were still making 400 rifles a day. I saw the huge shipbuilding facilities being used for building two-man kamikaze submarines, row after row. They were very successful, of course, with the kamikaze planes. And if we had tried to go there with an armada and make a landing, opposed landing, on Japan's own soil, I think it would have been disastrous for all of us. And the number of people killed in Hiroshima and Nagasaki were not to be belittled, but still small. We were killing more Japanese with our fire bombing of Tokyo in our raids than we did with those atom bombs.

Q: What did your work entail during the war, during those landings?

JS: Well, engineering officer of a combat battalion, which was assigned particularly to operate the beach. We would land early and try and keep the beach from becoming a bottleneck, which it could very easily be with boats coming in and not everybody moving up. And it would jam up and it was a target of course for enemy artillery and planes zeroed in. It was our job to end traffic backups. Boats would not land in the right place, landing crafts would get stuck because of change of the tide, blocking the way. We had to get 'em off, had to get 'em up and on. We had to help unload 'em of everything under the sun, artillery and supplies, tanks. So mostly it was a traffic control job. We landed on the beach and for the most part stayed on the beach or close to it, to keep it operating, the bridge between the Navy in the water and the land target of the Army and Marines.

Q: So were you being fired upon during this time?

JS: There were incidents of being fired upon, yes. I did not suffer in my unit large casualties. It is a fact that the number of men I lost in four hot landings was one tenth of what I lost in one kamikaze attack on the ship we were on. When we were going to land near Okinawa, the kamikaze program or weapon was in high gear. Our ship, which was an AP (Assault Personnel), was not armed very well, and not armed enough to fend off a kamikaze anyway. He hit the ship and the bomb went off that was attached, but it blew a hole in the side of the ship above

the water line, so we did not sink, but we were out of business. The blast killed many of my men, but it saved me because of this famous story, which I shall tell you. I was at the bridge looking out at the sunset when somebody comes up and says, "We need a fourth for bridge, come on down in the board room and join us." "Okay." I go down there, I sat down, I was dealt the hand, I was looking at the hand and *Bam*. The lights went out. We had been hit at the bridge where I was standing, which was logical target. I had left just prior to the hit. And the next day I saw I still had the thirteen cards in my pocket. The thirteen cards are right now in the Morton Grove Historical Society, along with the story. That was my closest call.

Q: Was your ship close to shore or were you out on the water when it got hit?

JS: We were out with a convoy. We got towed, close enough to shore to get onto landing craft and go ashore. And the *Henrico*, which was the name of the ship we were on, I don't know the procedure of where they sent it for repairs, but it was hauled away someplace and it's cared for. Probably not immediately— there were more pressing matters. We never got back on anyway. The next ship I got on was taking me back to Seattle.

Q: Back home.

JS: Yes. Meanwhile I did some traveling in Japan, up to Tokyo, where I met a fellow who was from Chicago who I became good friends with, best man at his wedding. He died about four months ago. He was 100.

Q: This was after surrender when you were in Japan? This was after V-J Day?

JS: Yes, yes. V-J Day was in process and, well, completed, so when we landed it was in fact occupation to maintain the peace, because there was all kinds of rumors about an uprising, mutiny of the Japanese military, which was a diehard outfit that didn't want to give up. It was shameful to do so; that was their motto. And of course we ran into that at Guam for instance. When we landed in Guam it was a long time before all of those guys that were back in the jungle. In fact, after we left they were still fighting 'em there, hiding out and just refusing to surrender. And so that was, say, the philosophy, the policy that we would have run into. Man woman and child, whether they wanted to or not. So again I say, thank heaven we put an end to the war, which would have went much longer, without the bombs. They wouldn't accept one drop. Why didn't we drop it off in a hinterland where there where no people? We didn't have that many bombs on hand, handy to use. It took a long time to make them then. We had to make a statement that was understood. And they did understand it; the emperor did understand it and he took over.

Q: So you were in college when the war began, is that right?

JS: Yeah, I graduated in '39 from Lane Tech. So when '41, when Pearl Harbor was hit, I was in my third year, beginning of my third year. Stayed two more years under ROTC. It was an accelerated ROTC program. Normally ROTC is just a physical education or passive class. We did fieldwork during class on weekends during the time we were in school. We didn't go home for summer vacation. We stayed and finished our engineering so we'd be more useful. As it turned out I didn't really use... I took industrial engineering and I did not use much of that in the war. However, I could later appreciate how industry produced so much so quick, how we became a nation with horse-drawn artillery to a nation that could put sixteen million men out there and supply them all with what they needed. Well-fed generally, the mail came through, and we were supplied with enough ammunition. I guess there was some shortage of clothing in the wintertime. I never met cold weather, met mostly warm weather and the damn bugs that went with it. The only thing I really suffered from was dengue fever. I had a spout of that to deal with. Personally that's all I dealt with. Well, there you have it. It's my history, but what about Morton Grove history?

Q: Let's get to that. So the war ends and you come home to Chicago. Had you met Mary Helen before the war or was it after the war?

JS: No, after the war. We got married in '54. Yeah, that's when we got married and we were married sixty years; in '14 she died. We moved from Chicago to here in 1960.

Q: What brought you to Morton Grove?

JS: A desire to move out of the city. And having been to the forest preserve as a Boy Scout, out here as a matter of fact. I was somewhat familiar with this forest preserve as a Boy Scout in Chicago because way back then there was the L that came out—we called it the Galloping Goose—that came out to Dempster Street. You could walk from Dempster Street to the forest preserve. So I knew the forest preserve and so looking for a house led here first of all. And lo and behold there was a development at that time, houses being built. That was a big growth time for Morton Grove, the '60s. There was this development near the forest preserve. There was a lot right next to the forest preserve and the school was adjacent. What more could we ask for? And a river ran through it. So I signed up.

Q: What are your memories of Morton Grove at that time in the '60s when you moved in? Were there things that you got involved with locally at that time?

JS: Well, I again was spending a great deal of time commuting. And I didn't have much time, but I was still with the Boy Scouts, and I became aware of the Boy

Scouts here. There was a beautification committee forming and they wanted the participation of youth, so they asked for a representative for the Boy Scouts and the Girl Scouts and I became a member of the beautification committee of Morton Grove. And I stayed with that committee for a long time. We did quite a few things: created the first sign ordinance, for instance, landscape specifications in the business community. There is in this book, the Morton Grove Centennial, half a page that I wrote about the beautification committee. It was a committee, therefore it did not have any power. Now it's an appearance commission, which does have authority to call the shots on certain things. We had to make our case by pleading and asking for this and that.

Between that and the Boy Scouts and the commuting and the housework, I didn't have much time, but eventually I did join the Morton Grove Legion and get busy with it. But if there was then spare time, Mary Helen and I, after marriage as well as before, would go skiing. And our son was growing up and he went with us, even if it only meant to Wilmot up in Wisconsin, you've heard of them. That certainly has a lot to do with the history of Morton Grove doesn't it? [laughter]

Q: Well, things have changed in Morton Grove over the years, I'm sure, right?

JS: Well, yes. Morton Grove is renowned somewhat I think... It's only 22,000 now and it's been a lot smaller, of course. And look what it has done. It has a history, reputation of it being a site for roadhouses and so forth, right? Dime-a-dance

place of whatever kind. Then comes the gun ordinance, which I don't need to go into the history of that. But most villages' elections are pretty cut and dried. There's a certain group and that... but we've had primaries and primaries. And this coming election we're gonna have competition again. Staackman has got himself a team. We have competition in our elections—not common in small villages. It's been somewhat interesting, somewhat exciting, somewhat expensive to some people. And here we go again.

Q: Have you stayed involved with the local politics over the years?

JS: Well, I have not been in the politics, no. I pulled my politics bid with the Legion. There's been some there. I helped sometimes in village campaigns, but I tried later to stay away and make a contribution, perhaps, to help a particular cause, but I didn't want a sign in my lawn or I didn't want to go door to door. I refuse to do that. I'm acquainted with members of the parties. I'm very good friends with John and Marian Thill. I know Dan Staackman pretty well too, through a connection with the park.

See, the park became caretaker of three things Mary Helen and I were particularly happy about and interested in: the Illinois State Nature Preserve, the Veteran's Living Memorial, and the Education Center at the museum. You're familiar with all of those? Well, I was the principal in all of them. Mary Helen was the worker in all three. Now, of course, the prairie qualified as a state nature

preserve due to her efforts to invite the right people in to qualify it, to verify it. And then get the Illinois Department of Natural Resources to identify it as a state nature preserve and get the governor to sign off on it.

Now the Veteran's Living Memorial initially did not have that wall there, but the park wanted to enhance the memorial. It was just a hill with a stone and a plaque on it. They said, "Maybe we could enhance that." "Yes, I'll look into it." So I contacted and became an associate member of the Vietnam Veterans of America Chapter 311. And I asked them and they came right away and said... Well, let me back up a minute... That was originally established by me as a Vietnam Veterans Memorial because they came back with not too great a welcome, and I thought it was something we should definitely do, recognize them. So I got permission from the park and they said OK and we planted eight trees; there were eight members of the community that were killed. Four from one graduating class at Niles West. There's the original plaque and rock there still on the hill. But when it came to the end the park board thought to enhance and make it more than just what was there—trees kinda lost amongst other trees.

OK, so I started asking, and lo and behold, of course, the VVA said, "We want a memorial that includes everybody, not us separate. We're part of all of veterans." So that's what it became. Added twelve trees to cover every other war. There's twenty trees there now and a plaque, which I made—well, I got a foundry to make it. And the Park put the wall up, plaque on, so now we have a Veterans—not Vietnam Veterans—Memorial. Better. Much better.

Q: That's a great legacy to have established.

JS: Yes, well, I'm proud of my legacies in this village. There's a lot of small things but those three... For years while I was a member of the historical society I kept hearing about, "We need an annex, we need an annex." They were having a hell of a time in that dining room and a little office in the Haupt-Yehl house to conduct any kind of activities. There was always a question of where and how. And the story about that is in here, the history of what took place in order to... [searching through book] The annex was built after this book was put together, so it's back in the appendix. [searching through book] There it is. There was always a talk about what we need, but how can we get the place for it. I went round and round for four years with the park board finding space. They didn't want to give up open space. To add on was out of the question because of the ADA, elevator or whatever. They'd have to destroy the farmhouse as it was supposed to be.

So what we finally talked to the village and Ralph Czerwinski, currently village manager, came over right away and said, "How about that property over there, adjacent property?" Between the house and the property line, between the park and the village, there was very little space. "We'll lease you a piece of property of the village," he said. It was wonderful. I said, "Well, I'm gonna see what I can do." So I finally got a piece of property and I got an architect and he copied the architecture of the farmhouse, although at the time I wanted to go

gung-ho for the latest, with renewable resources for heat and light. I was gonna put all kinds of solar panels and I was gonna have the house itself built to be LEED. But I ran into cost problems. Anyway, we went for somewhat familiar architecture matching, because everybody said it should match. You can't put solar panels up there and expect it to match, so I ran into that problem and that's what you got there now. The Education Center has been very useful. Mary Walsh and Mary Bush were the first two curators, and they made it come alive. They really turned it into an education center with a lot of activities. And the current curator, poor girl, she had to step aside for three months. They gave her a part-time job at the park, but to save money they closed this thing down for three months 'cause it's not that busy in the wintertime, they said. You heard about it?

Q: I can imagine why that would be the case, but that's a shame.

JS: I couldn't believe it, but anyway, that's the case there. So that's somewhat of a history of those three legacies I figure I'm leaving. There are quite a few other smaller things in the Legion and elsewhere, but I'm talking about too much about mine rather than the history of Morton Grove.

Q: But yours is part of the history of Morton Grove now at this point. It seems like you care a lot about it, based on these things.

JS: Well, I was happy to accomplish something. You get a big kick out of not just donating money, but to make something with the money. I've been lucky to have the opportunities in the village here to make things. I'm looking for more. Well, I got your room.

Q: Yeah, the Quiet Reading Room in the library is now named after your wife.

JS: Right. Well, steer me into the history of the village if you can. I'll try to go the direction I've told you what I can about it from my point of view, and I guess it's gotta be from my point of view because I wouldn't know much about it otherwise.

Q: Well, you've already explained the different areas you've been involved with.

JS: Maybe we've done enough. It's been an hour.

Q: We can wrap it up. [laughter]

JS: OK, good! [laughter]

Q: After all these years in Morton Grove are there any things that you've learned or things that you've come to appreciate over your life?

JS: Well, I've come to appreciate the location of Morton Grove. There is a group— John and Marian Thill lead it and they are the principals of it— that's doing a lot of work in the forest preserve. Some people don't understand why you don't just leave it alone, but it is become invaded by honeysuckles and buckthorn, to the expense of the variety or the diversity it should have. And they have been working very hard for many years now, with help. For instance, last Saturday there was 25 people out there working on removing buckthorn and other invasives. There was 20 of them from Notre Dame [College Prep]. They love to, of course, build a fire and clean up the woods. I'm a little reluctant to see them clean up too much; those dead trees are a haven for wildlife or bugs and things that support wildlife.

The forest preserve itself, under its new head, Toni Preckwinkle—the woman who's now the president of the Cook County Board and therefore head of the forest preserve—she has seen fit to treat the forest preserve as something other than a haven for people's cousins or something, a patronage outfit. She treats it like a preserve, and she has hired contractors to do some work that's needed elsewhere, like what is being done here in Morton Grove. And there's an organization called Friends of the Forest Preserves, which is a bigger outfit, but our outfit is Friends of the Morton Grove Forest Preserves. I will loan you [the *Sites* book] if you want to make copies and put it in the library. It's not proprietary material.

But what the Thills are doing, with help from volunteers, in the forest preserve to restore its diversity, what it has provided in the way of a recreational facility, summer and winter, for children and adults, everybody under the sun—not just picnickers, but bikers and hikers and skaters and skiers and lovers and birders... all of them. It's an asset, a real asset that I've come to appreciate, and of course came here originally because of. And never use a preposition to end a sentence with. That's what I can say about that. What was your question? Your closing question.

Q: That was it: what do you appreciate about Morton Grove?

JS: Today, well, that's one thing I appreciate. I appreciate the people. There is a changing demographics and I sometimes am concerned a little bit about the fact that some of the demographic creators are not joining in all together in village activity. I haven't seen it. Although there are a lot of Indian and Filipino and Chinese and Japanese Boy Scouts doing well. And we all know how well they're all doing in school. They're maintaining the level of our schools very well. And I guess they're good library patrons, are they not?

Q: I'd say so.

JS: They're no trouble patrons. Do they return their books on time?

Q: I'm sure they do, yeah.

JS: I got one out right now. So that's my current impression of Morton Grove. Still positive, but noticing a change. And we'll see what the elections bring us and accept whatever they do locally. I'm not so sure I want to accept nationally. Do you remember a cartoon by Mauldin at the time of Kennedy's assassination—the greatest cartoon ever made, no caption, just a picture. Lincoln in the memorial in Washington D.C. with his hands like this. Everybody knew what it meant. I brought it out again. It is appropriate to publish it again, I think, because of what's happening. I wonder if I sent it to the newspaper if they'd publish it.

Q: Maybe.

JS: What if I gave you a copy, would you put it up? That would be too political, perhaps, for your business.

Q: For the library? Yeah, probably.

JS: Yeah, I bet it would be. Well, I think it's so fitting for today.